



# Anyone for a bit of urban acupuncture?

The axiom ‘a little goes a long way’ certainly rings true when communities take control of their own public spaces and identities, as **Julian Dobson** explains.

**T**hree years ago, Mary Clear planted her front garden with vegetables and put up a notice. ‘Grow your own,’ it said. ‘Or share this stuff.’ Meanwhile Nik Green started filling neglected bits of public land with herbs and vegetables.

Mary’s ‘propaganda garden’ and Nik’s guerilla gardening could have stopped there. Instead, they’ve turned Todmorden, at the far end of Yorkshire’s Calder Valley, into a town with a new sense of life and a magnet for ‘vegetable tourists’, from celebrity chefs to Prince Charles.

Incredible Edible Todmorden has become a bit of a byword for local growing. And it has been extraordinarily successful in its colonisation of unusual spaces, from the front yard of the police station to the sides of the Rochdale Canal towpath.

But why does this matter? What’s happening here is the beginning of a survival strategy for towns and neighbourhoods in the 21st century. It shows how we can link global issues of

resource constraints and environmental change with the quest for local empowerment and responsibility and a re-creation of community.

Todmorden got growing with some cheeky reuse of public space and a can-do attitude. As Pam Warhurst, Incredible Edible’s co-founder, put it: “We don’t ask permission. It takes too long and anyway we’re improving the place.” But there’s much more to it than chutzpah.

Walk around Todmorden now and you’ll find signs and maps for a new ‘green route’ of walkways with edible and bee-friendly plantings, designed to bring a unity and identity to the town.

This is destination management without the use of consultants. It’s local people deciding what kind of town they want to create and building an identity and reputation around that, starting with small actions and joining them up to create coherence.

In the phrase coined by Jaime Lerner, mayor of Curitiba in Brazil, it’s ‘urban acupuncture’ –

small interventions that make a big difference.

There are more than 20 Incredible Edibles elsewhere now, from nearby Rossendale to Montreal. Brighton Council has issued planning guidance encouraging local growing in new property developments. In Bristol, a neighbourhood planning forum has mooted the idea of turning the main road outside the famous St Mary Redcliffe church into a park.

The Localism Act includes plans for a ‘community right to buy’ surplus public land and buildings, and the government intends to give local communities more power over development through neighbourhood plans. So could these help to turn local growing into a national phenomenon?

The legislation is certainly well-intentioned and shows that ministers want to encourage community action. But the experience in Scotland, which has a stronger version of the community right to buy, is that the process has often been unwieldy. It takes a determined community to use it effectively.

The reality is that the government is playing catch-up to a movement that is already taking off. A recent survey for the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners showed nearly 88,000 people are waiting for allotments across England.

Organisations such as the Transition Towns network are helping local groups create community gardens and growing spaces. Landshare is one of several projects putting owners of spare land in touch with would-be growers. Often the barriers are not national legislation but practical, local issues such as the attitude of officials. In Todmorden, Calderdale Council now offers a simple community growing licence, while social landlord Pennine Housing changed its rules to let tenants keep chickens.

Sometimes the secret is simply to get on with it. Incredible Edible Todmorden caught on because people saw things happening, understood the idea, and wanted to be part of it. As one member put it, “if you eat, you’re in.”

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## About Julian Dobson

Julian Dobson’s aim is to share ideas about improving towns, cities and communities, and to help them grow. He does that by writing, hosting conversations, speaking and listening, researching and explaining, connecting and encouraging. Dobson is a writer, editor, facilitator and consultant specialising in regeneration and sustainable communities. Through think tank Urban Pollinators he helps people and organisations share learning and good practice. He is a Fellow of the RSA and has been a voluntary board member at the Centre for Local Economic Strategies.